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Film and Video

Critical Corrections

by Chuck Kleinhans

The love/hate relation of artists for critics remains one of the more enduring features of the artworld. My personal favorite example came a decade ago when a young filmmaker's press release for his one person show arrived in the mail with the scrawled note: "99% of the people reading this are Idiots I mean you."

Media arts exhibit a particularly uneven critical development. Most video criticism today emerges from self-interested participants such as curators and makers and tends to a certain circularity within a small field--not unlike criticism of fiber, ceramic, and performance arts. Within the art press, film and video writing exists largely as an add-on or special attraction--not surprising given the overwhelming domination of the ad pages by galleries, not screening spaces. As a result film and video critics often find themselves marginalized by other art writers while granted exaggerated regard--love and hate--by media makers.

At the start of the Reagan era several events shaped the current critical scene. Conservative critics such as Hilton Kramer, who claimed that National Endowment money fueled left and feminist art writing, found a sympathetic audience with Reagan appointees. Realizing that most of a generation of young critics embraced liberal, if not Marxist, values, decision makers ceased fellowships for critics. Many artists applauded this move, thinking that they would get more money once the parasites were driven out. They failed

to see that criticism is not simply the expressive ego-tripping of word crafters, but that it's a necessary and integral part of the distribution, exhibition, and, eventually, preservation of art.

Hard times for the common critic accelerated the domination of academic criticism, for academics are expected to write for free to get and keep their jobs. While interviewing members of the Manhattan experimental film scene a few years ago, I found a consistent and irrational fear of a presumed cabal of New York University grad students who were dominating critical discourse. Rather than recognizing that all new writing contributes to a general climate sustaining and informing current and future audiences, these filmmakers regretted the passing of the good old days when Jonas Mekas produced enthusiastic weekly reports on the underground cinema scene for the Village Voice. If young critics tend to orbit around the concerns and values of their mentors, they do not stay there forever. And the well-known problems of academic criticism are certainly matched by the peculiarities of artworld journalism.

Most serious scholars would be appalled by the seldom disinterested norms of art writing. Everyone knows--that is everyone who's been around for a while--that it's commonplace to find friends writing about friend's work, even spouses and lovers producing criticism which never acknowledges the personal relations involved. One career management handbook suggests the artist without reviews to list in a resume, "purchase the services of an essayist to write a review and description of your work," adding that art history profs and grad students are cheaper than working journalists (Frisher and Adams, *The Artist in the Marketplace*). The authors go on, The critic praises art he or she believes in, but can also be paid by a gallery to write a review of a certain artist or show. The publications the critic works for may run these reviews because they want to use, without additional expense, the gallery's color plates, which give their magazine a quality look. The critic has been known to accept gifts of works of art from artists before or after a favorable review.

Certainly a "truth in packaging" standard for artworld criticism would open a few eyes and keep the game honest. With this in mind, when I wrote my first Dialogue column (Nov.-Dec. 87), I indicated my relation with Dan Curry, but

the point was cut without my knowledge during some necessary changes by the editor. (Curry was my student at Northwestern, we collaborated in shooting a Super 8mm documentary, and we've remained acquaintances since then.) Subsequently, Dan took exception to some remarks in the piece which might seem to question his teaching commitment and talent, and my use of privileged knowledge. So it becomes personal, professional, and public all at once. (For the record, I know he's a skilled and dedicated teacher.)

Much more seriously, though, the edited column totally dropped out mention of Kim Loughlin, codirector with Curry of Southwestern Ballet (she's seen in the production still illustrating the column), and how her career contrasted with his. Trained as a sculptor and photographer, she's supported herself with nonacademic jobs such as window dresser and food stylist. That women artists can be so casually disappeared from art criticism marks a pernicious norm--one that must change. So my next column will be about Midwest women media artists such as Lilly Boruzskowski, Celia Condit, Doyle Detroit, Pam Falkenberg and Donna Kennedy, who are making witty satires here in the heartland.

end

Chuck Kleinhans did the camerawork for Julia Lesage's new video about Nicaragua, Mensajeros.